DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 577 HE 009 900

TITLE Activity Evaluation in Higher Education. R & D for Higher Education, 1978:2.
INSTITUTION National Swedish Board of Universities and Colleges, Stockholm. Research and Development Unit.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 8p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Board of Universities and Colleges, R & D Unit, P.O. Box 45501, S-104 30 Stockholm, Sweden

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cost Effectiveness; *Educational Change; Educational Planning; *Evaluation Methods; Factor Analysis; *Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; *Research Projects
IDENTIFIERS *Institutional Renewal; *Sweden

ABSTRACT

The state of a higher education evaluation project aimed at improving efficiency and increasing the capacity for self-renewal in higher education at the beginning of 1978 is described. The working methods of the project include: building up a knowledge base from literature and from foreign and Swedish universities and colleges; examining problems through direct contacts with universities and colleges, courses and conferences, and continuous information and reports; and developing means of special studies and pilot projects. Some of the directions proposed for activity evaluation involve discussions of goals, cost analyses, process analyses, result analyses, and organizational analyses. (SPG)

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UHÄ NATIONAL SWEDISH BOARD OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES ISSN 0347-[illegible]

R & D for Higher Education

INFORMATION ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

1978:2

CURRENT PROJECT

TITLE OF PROJECT: Activity Evaluation in Higher Education

IN PROGRESS AT: R & D Unit, National Board of Universities and Colleges, UHÄ, P O Box 45501, S-104 30 Stockholm, Sweden. Phone 08-24 85 60.

PROJECT LEADER: Bertil Östergren

A higher education evaluation project has been in progress since 1976/77 as part of the UHÄ (National Board of Universities and Colleges) programme for the follow-up of the reform of higher education. This memorandum describes the state of the project at the beginning of 1978.

BACKGROUND

One of the starting points of the project is the functional study of educational planning which was conducted at UHÄ between late 1974 and early 1977 and which was presented in four interim reports under the common heading Planning for Change in Higher Education (UHÄ Report 1975:4, UHÄ Report 1975:20, UHÄ Report 1977:1, UHÄ Report 1977:2). 1)

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1) These reports are in Swedish. A brief survey in English of all reports is to be found in R & D for Higher Education 1977:12. A summary in English of the two first reports is Bertil Östergren: Planning for Change in Higher Education, Office of the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities, Stockholm 1975. The third report is in its entirety translated into English - Barbro Berg and Bertil Östergren: Innovations and Innovation Processes in Higher Education, National Board of Universities and Colleges, Stockholm 1977.

ED153577

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In the functional study, the planning of higher education was described in six pricipal stages: goals - restrictions and resources - processes (research, education, administration) - results - activity evaluation - reappraisal of goals, restrictions/resources and processes. Whereas, for example, relatively abundant scope is given in the planning process to questions concerning resources and restrictions, the functional study indicates that insufficient attention is paid to activity evaluation. This aspect needs more scope, and it also needs to be developed qualitatively.

The 1977 reform of higher education provides another of the starting points of the project. A reduction of central control concerning details and greater liberty in the deployment of resources are among the objectives of this reform. This in turn provides opportunities of improved activities, opportunities which have to be utilized by critically analysing the activities that are conducted and by openness to changes and reorientations.

A third starting point lies in the fact that the powerful expansion of higher education and research during the post-war era has passed its peak. At all events, future growth will be appreciably more restrained. Changes and new activities can no longer be sufficiently provided for with new resources; there is a greater need for the revision of priorities and for the discontinuation of some established activities.

The rising importance of activity evaluation or institutional self-evaluation as a component of educational planning has also been generated, for example, by the need to adjust to new categories of students and to a pattern of recurrent education. Yet another causal factor is to be seen in a desire for the internal renewal of education to be placed in the forefront of attention. The studies of research policy and research education presented recently are also bound to affect the evaluation of activities in higher education.

THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVITY EVALUATION

Why do we speak of activity evaluation instead of, say, result control or result analyses?

We wish to emphasize that it is all activities, not only results, that are to be scrutinized. Since results in some cases are of a long-term character and difficult to measure, one is obliged to a certain extent to make use of process indicators in order to assess efficiency.

We also wish to make it clear that evaluation cannot be based on absolutely objective criteria; ultimately

it has to be founded on values. There are various types of interest groups involved where higher education and research are concerned, and they can have different values (goals, needs, interests). These questions need to be tackled in a more deliberate and sophisticated manner than hitherto.

Activity evaluation is an overriding concept in relation to various types of specialized evaluations, analyses and controls. Its purpose is to scrutinize the entire organization and its activities. The emphasis is on institutional self-evaluation.

Of course, there is a great deal of activity evaluation in higher education already, in one form or another. This evaluation is constantly in progress in a host of different ways and is given a variety of names - learning by experience, feedback, course evaluations, cost accounting. The aim of the present project is to develop this function methodologically and practically. Above all we wish to enhance the capacity of higher education for self-evaluation and self-renewal.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The pricipal aim of the project is to help improve efficiency and increase the capacity for selfrenewal in higher education. This is to be accomplished by contributing towards a quantitative and qualitative development of critical analysis as part of the planning of activities. Among other things the intention is to help initiate processes with this aim. Thus we do not primarily intend to act through the publication of reports containing recommendations and suggestions. Conferences, courses and other forms of contact with people active in higher education will play a more essential part.

WORKING METHODS OF THE PROJECT

The working methods of the project can be described as follows.

1 Building up a knowledge base

   a from literature
   b from foreign universities and colleges etc
   c from Swedish universities and colleges etc

2 Informing, making aware, raising problems

   a through direct contacts with universities and colleges

b through courses and conferences
c through continuous information and reports

3 Developing

a by means of special studies
b by means of pilot projects

Activities so far have mainly focussed on building up the knowledge base. Our problem area is touched on by many different bodies of literature, e.g. organization theory, organizational development, innovation theory and strategy for change, evaluation research, and cost/efficiency analysis. The application of these fields of research and literature to higher education is still embryonic, and the project therefore has to be viewed in a long-term perspective. Moreover, the project has to be viewed partly as a "meta-project"; it can furnish ideas for other central and local R & D projects.

Where higher education in other countries is concerned, experience has above all been derived from activity evaluations at universities and colleges in the United States, from literature on the subject and from field trips.

During the academic year 1977/78, the project will be expanded to include the second of the above mentioned fields.

Members of the project team participated in a certain amount of courses and conferences during the academic year 1976/77. These activities will be greatly expanded during 1977/78. Thus four-day courses are to be held for each of the six higher education regions. The project team will also be taking part in other courses and conferences, and an information series will probably be started early in 1978.

It is hoped that various special studies and local pilot projects will be able to start during the spring term 1978 and during the academic year 1978/79. The central project will be able to support local pilot projects of this kind in a variety of ways.

DIRECTION AND WORKING FORMS OF ACTIVITY EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The burden of current business impedes activities focussing on planning and activity evaluation. A reduction of routine matters is therefore to be seen as a prerequisite of efficient activity evaluation. Also, work procedures can be developed so as to leave more scope for critical and creative activities - internal meetings without current business on the agenda, ad hoc project groups and so on.

The following are some of the directions that can be taken by activity evaluation: discussions of goals, cost analyses, process analyses, result analyses and organizational analyses. It is only when integrated with ordinary activities that analyses of this kind will have any major effects in the form of revised priorities and other changes.

Some of the above mentioned points require further comment. Generally speaking, insufficient scope has been provided for discussions of goals in higher education. There are examples suggesting that when a department or an education committee goes into conclave for a few days to discuss the goals of activities, this may result in a substantial improvement of efficiency and innovative capacity.

Our higher education statistics are excessively preoccupied with student statistics, to the detriment of cost analysis. Parallel to the activity evaluation project, studies have been started at the UHÄ of average costs per student in different educational programmes. The institutional self-evaluation project itself also includes a special study, now in progress, for supplementary development work on methods of economic description.

Process anayses occur in the form of course evaluations, for example, but process analysis and its methods are probably in need of expansion.

Result analyses appear to require development above all in connection with interest group models and qualitative evaluations.

Organizational analyses of higher education have so far been conducted mainly under the auspices of the National Audit Bureau and through the UHÄ functional study. Local analyses have also been undertaken, however, and ought probably to be undertaken more extensively.

The term activity evaluation is perhaps above all calculated to put on in mind of annual reports, financial auditing and suchlike. Therefore it is perhaps not altogether out of place to draw attention to some of the working procedures which should be given a great deal of scope in activity evaluation: conferences, seminars, project groups, special studies of various kinds, development projects, action research, personnel training, the utilization of external consultants, organizational development, and the compilation of planning documents.

ACTIVITY EVALUATION AT THE UHÄ

One sub-project concerns the UHÄ's evaluation of its own activities. A special study group has been set up at the UHÄ for this purpose, and various activities of critical self-analysis have been planned.

SOME BASIC PROBLEMS

Activity evaluation presupposes that changes can result from the evaluation. A self-evaluating organization must therefore be able to take the consequences and change itself. However, it is in the nature of an organization to guard itself against change, at all events against changes which do not agree with its values and interests. How can an organization be equipped with built-in mechanisms promoting self-evaluation and self-change?

Activity evaluation also presupposes experiments, because changes sometimes have to be practically tested first. Experiments of this kind may also need to touch on such areas as decision-making systems, institutional organization, resource allocation, the structure of staff positions and so on. How can opportunities for such experiments be provided in a system with such a tradition of central control as Swedish higher education?

The goals of higher education are complex and sometimes contradictory. Goal achievement, moreover, is hard to measure, especially in the short term. How can one find criteria and indicators on which an assessment of efficiency (goal achievement) can be fairly based? Must one perhaps build to a great extent on presumed connections between the design of the process and the results? What does this require in the way of research and experimentation, for example, concerning non subject-specific goals (attitudes, values, critical capacity, creativity, problem solving capacity etc)?

The aspects of activities and results which are easiest to describe in quantitative terms are very liable to dominate an evaluation of activities. How can a judicious balance be struck between qualitative and quantitative aspects?

Activity evaluation (like the planning of activities generally) has difficulty in obtaining sufficient scope, because day-to-day work ("the agenda") gives priority to itself. Repetitive processes which are characteristic of bureaucracies (and the higher education system is a bureaucracy among other things) dominate administrative activities at the expense of

dynamic and creative processes. Institutional self-evaluation must imply among other things that dynamic and innovative processes are systematically given more scope.

Where annual reports and other written reporting are concerned, the basic problem is to cut the flow of information to a minimum, otherwise we will drown in it. A decision maker must ask, not for the greatest possible amount of information but for the least possible amount of information required in order to take a decision.

CONTINUING FORMS OF THE PROJECT

At present the personnel strength of the project comprises part of the working time of three persons at the R & D Unit of the UHÄ, corresponding altogether to about one full-time appointment. As has already been mentioned, work on the project so far has been mainly concerned with building up a knowledge base.

Now that more scope is to be given to information and liaison activities and to concrete development work, the intention is to set up a reference group for the project. Staff will also have to be engaged for special studies.

The project team are anxious to receive particulars concerning activities of various kinds with a bearing on the project.

<u>Further information through</u>:

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